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ABSTRACT

A case study was done of the possible role of strategic planning processes for smoothing the transition period experienced by colleges and universities when changes in top leadership occur. The study was conducted in a medium-sized midwestern state university that had begun, 3 years earlier, a strategic planning process which had been institutionalized throughout the university. However, the impending retirement of a long-term president and the inaugural year of a newly-appointed chancellor of a new system of higher education in the state threatened to upset the institutional equilibrium. A first phase of the study conducted a series of interviews and document analyses. Later a researcher attended meetings of a key strategic planning committee that oversaw the planning for the transition period. Findings suggested that members of an organization will participate in changing the organizational culture when a majority feel that they have a voice in guiding the change. In addition, a successful process must be able to contravene the tendency of participants to departmentalize and "turf-guard". Finally, leadership transitions not only leave a vacuum but unleash powerful forces in conflict for the soul of an institution that present problems for strategic planners. Included are eight references. (JB)

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Faring Forward: The Strategic Planning Process as Talisman During Periods of Institutional Transition

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"But why drives on that ship so fast
Without or wave or wind?"
-- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Introduction.

Changes in top leadership create periods of transition for organizations. In academia, with its tradition of long employment searches and ponderous governance requirements, these transitional periods can be protracted, uncomfortable, and debilitating to organizational momentum. In particular, the internecine strife usually unleashed by presidential searches on most campuses can also prove particularly destabilizing to institutional momentum. In fact, the laws of organizational physics -- that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction -- seemingly guarantee that where strategic planning has produced progress and movement in an institution, a presidential search provides a catalyst and a focus for reaction against further change. Additionally, changes to the macro structure into which colleges and universities must sometimes be made to fit -- for example, the creation of a single system of higher education at the state level under a chancellor's supervision in lieu of eleven separate institutions -- produce transitions characterized by uncertainty, loss of control, and external pressures for a change of course in institutional direction. Such transitions often come at the expense of strategic vision and momentum, and threaten to retard institutional progress.

The authors initially advanced the thesis that strategic planning processes which are genuinely institutionalized, that have become part of the fabric of the organization and that can claim a significant buy-in by its members, can be a powerful tool capable of keeping the institution on course even in the temporary absence of a leader and in the face of external threats to vitality.

Additional experience this year, however, has led the authors to recognize a fundamental corollary to their original hypotheses: that however much strategic planning may sustain institutional momentum during a period of a leadership vacuum, it is but a temporary expedient; that the successful implementation of the ongoing, strategic planning process demands a vested, top leadership interest for which there really is no substitute. Strategic planning can extend both institutional momentum and the commitment of an organization to change -- but only up to a certain point. Beyond that, the absence of leadership (or the presence of leadership which is hostile or indifferent to strategic planning) will prove fatal, and the forces of institutional inertia will overwhelm the planning process. Strategic planning can be a talisman for the ship of state through a period of transition, but it cannot sustain the vessel for an entire voyage. For that a captain is needed.

Informative Literature.

Since Keller (1983) first introduced the concept of strategic planning to higher education, such organizations have come to well appreciate the advantages to be had from both scanning the

environment for opportunities and assessing one's own institutional mission and strengths and weaknesses, in order to seize opportunities as they manifest themselves (Kearns, 1992). Campuses that truly subscribe to this kind of planning strategy are outwardly focused and ready to move in new directions to maintain or to improve organizational vitality. Cases in point are too numerous to mention in passing. Descriptions of in-place strategic planning models and accounts of their successes (as well as their shortcomings) are the norm wherever administrative professionals converge. The focus in the literature has been largely on how to identify changes in the external environment (e.g. Handy, 1990) and on how to mobilize the organization for a timely response. Steeples (1988) is but one notable example of such a collection of case studies.

More rarely discussed in the literature is an analysis of the impact of those organizational changes (inspired by strategic planning processes) upon the members of the campus in transition. As plans are set in motion, the organizational culture moves from a condition of stasis to one of mobilization. However, in this process any change -- even planned, productive change -- in the cultural condition is oftentimes unsettling for the organization's members. What internal, psycho-social effects does change produce on the organization? Moreover, in times of a shifting external seascape, can strategic planning *processes* themselves be deliberately utilized to stabilize an academic community -- to focus internal attention -- while sustaining the momentum achieved in aligning the institution to capitalize on opportunities sighted on the horizon?

Because strategic planning processes generally involve a number of decision-making groups on the campus, it is useful to consider the dynamics of the group process as one means of evaluating the condition of the organization's members during transitional periods. Yalom (1975) and Corey and Corey (1977) have described sequential stages through which groups of all types seem to pass as they develop the sense of cohesiveness that is required in order to work on an outcome -- in this case, a decision-making outcome. The study of group decision-making behavior in a "strategic planning council," for example, yields fascinating insights into the campus in transition. Such a group serves as a kind of barometer of the extent to which the *act* of planning is itself facilitating those cultural changes that are needed to evolve an organization. Only when an organizational culture has been moved into a receptive mode can it capitalize on identified strategic opportunities -- even when faced with what otherwise might be a debilitating period of transition in campus leadership.

Context of the Study.

Situations such as just described are not merely hypothetical. In a case well-known to the authors, a medium-sized midwestern state university three years ago began a strategic planning process which not only produced a document focusing the campus on its market niche, sensitizing it to threats and opportunities in the external environment, pushing it to seek comparative advantage and to sharpen mission, but also institutionalized the process throughout the University so that the overwhelming majority of departments came to feel ownership in the process. However, during the past year the University faced twin horns of a transition dilemma: the final, "retirement" year of a

long-time president coinciding with the inaugural year of a newly-appointed chancellor of an equally new system of higher education in the state. The vacuum created by the former promised to be filled with an incursion by the latter, bringing with it threatened changes in institutional mission, size, and direction.

At the campus an ineffectual -- albeit a long-enduring--president was retiring. In the last years of this presidency, strong leadership at the vice president and dean levels emerged and created many initiatives, including a strategic planning process. These endeavors collectively produced considerable institutional momentum -- a condition which ultimately proved threatening to the old order (including the outbound president) who opposed change on campus.

In such a situation, one would expect that whatever institutional momentum had been previously developed would slow, if not grind to a halt. The inducements against institutional progress in this context are formidable: any institution might understandably tend to hold its collective breath while a new president is chosen and so put off decisions, avoid setting priorities, and ignore threats and opportunities in the external environment. Some of this did happen at the campus featured in this study. The strategic planning process went forward in academic affairs and in the office of development. In these areas, the process produced plans that enumerated the achievements of the previous year's work, identified and prioritized new strategic opportunities, and assigned budgets and personnel to accomplish them. However, in business affairs and student affairs it fell victim to the inertia produced by the presidential transition and by the lack of commitment to strategic planning by the president. In retrospect, the strategic planning process only became institutionalized in those areas where there was strong leadership championing the process. At the same time, a university in such a situation is even less likely to maintain its forward motion in the face of system efforts seemingly aimed at centralization, reduction of institutional authority, and increased bureaucratization.

However, the dynamics of the strategic planning process itself can -- and in the present specific case did -- provide a counterweight to the natural inertia of periods of transition in institutional leadership. The planning process in this case was used to sustain the forward motion of institutional culture through a period of transition, even as it was earlier used to adjust the culture to the imperatives of academic strategy.

Method.

Planning activity at this campus has been subjected to both process and content analysis over the last fourteen months. In the first phase of the study a series of interviews and document analyses resulted in a report that recommended a series of refinements to the process. One such recommendation was to reconfigure the membership in a principal decision-making group to assure that a University-wide purview would be promulgated at that level of priority setting. This reconstituted group of decision makers was the one selected for study. Known as the Tier Two Planning Council, it was chaired by the academic affairs vice president and consisted of one academic dean, one Board of Regents member, one student representative, one department chair, and

five faculty members from throughout the campus. The charge to this group was to assess existing institutional goals and objectives in light of changing conditions both on and off the campus, and to make recommendations for retaining, modifying, or abandoning existing objectives and initiating new ones.

A researcher attended Tier Two meetings as a nonparticipant observer. Her objective was to note the ways in which this group utilized strategic planning processes to make organizational decisions that would help the institution maintain its equilibrium during a year of upheaval. Of particular interest at the onset, then, was the development of a working style within this decision-making group. It has been observed that groups will move through different stages as they become more effective as a team (Corey & Corey, 1977; Yalom, 1975). The researcher analyzed Tier Two behavior to determine when it moved from one stage to another in its decision making process and to judge how that affected organizational objectives.

In its initial stage a group's task is to become oriented to its role. This phase is characterized by hesitant participation and clarification of goals and objectives. Procedures to be followed are generally established at this time as are expected norms of behavior such as confidentiality, attendance, and timetables. The first three meetings of Tier Two were very much concerned with procedural matters. These meetings were accompanied by much background reading to be done over a five-week period between mid-December, 1991 to mid-January, 1992. During these sessions the leader (or chair) defined the process and provided structure; the group's concerns were with understanding and articulating process and goals through question asking.

The second stage of a group's development is characterized by intra-group conflict, dominance, and rebellion. During this period a pecking order becomes established, and resistance to leadership is observed. The group comes to recognize the limitations of the leader and will move through a process of disenthrallment with him or her. The first signs of this behavior surfaced in mid-January when one group member openly challenged the leader's authority to set the agenda and offered one of his own in substitution. This coincided with the larger group's break up into smaller subcommittees. Although each one had comparable tasks, these subcommittees approached the work very differently. Many rejected in part the work they had been assigned to do and even refused to address specific issues. Absences and tardiness were quite evident.

In the third stage, the group develops a cohesiveness that is characterized by increased morale, mutual trust, and an observable *esprit de corps*. Attendance often improves at this stage and group goals are now commonly understood. Two rounds of subcommittee meetings and ten days later, it was evident that the larger Tier Two had moved into the third stage. The renegade member, although still voicing his own particular agenda, was being systematically suppressed by the group at large. He was being made to conform to group norms so that they could "get on with" the business at hand -- to make strategic decisions for the University.

The fourth stage is known as the working stage. Because there is a level of trust established, the group is now willing to take risks. The clearly understood goals and the sense of inclusion

among members make it possible for the group to also share leadership. This is generally the most dynamic and productive stage for decision making. By the end of January and approximately fifteen assorted meetings into the process, the Tier Two Planning Council was working well together both as an entire group and as subcommittees. Their time spent together was entirely "on task" and efficient. Even the renegade member was now pulling in harness. An impressive amount of work was accomplished over the next few weeks. And some very creative thinking resulted as the group worked on strategic decision making and priority setting. By the middle of February, group reliance on initial structure (e.g. "forms") had really slacked off. But at their own initiative they developed a very formal voting procedure to bring closure to matters once they appeared to have reached consensus. They were thinking as a team, most cognizant of their "University hats."

The fifth stage begins when termination of the group process is imminent. This is a time when the group begins to evaluate its effectiveness. Often, follow up activities are suggested or arranged in order to bring the group to closure on its tasks. As it was winding down, Tier Two began to take official minutes of its meetings in order to assure that no loose ends were left. Its final meetings were in mid-April when it produced a prioritized list of initiatives to be passed on to the president. Discussions included evaluative comments about the nature of their work and what they had been able to accomplish. Possible changes in structure to subsequent Tier Two working groups were voiced. This group's work officially terminated with their report.

The Tier Two Planning Council had quickly become a highly productive and effective decision-making group. It did reflect preliminary campus thinking in its early stages. But it eventually transcended the confines of smaller unit goal setting. Because it adhered to its charge to keep the organizational overview at the forefront of its own decision making -- because it successfully wore the University hat -- its strategic priorities went several steps better than any individual unit was in a position to do. The group found creative ways to synthesize and redefine organizational goals and objectives. Tier Two moved the campus into a receptive mode; it positioned the organization to seize upon strategic opportunities that would well serve the campus as a whole. This is evident in the text of its final report to the president. Tier Two was indeed a bellwether for change in the cultural environment of the organization.

Findings.

Three particular findings surfaced in this study. First, in sustaining institutional momentum through strategic planning, process considerations are just as important to organizational culture as are outcomes issues. Our experience clearly suggests that members of the organization will participate in changing the organizational culture when a majority feel that they have a voice in guiding the change, and that they will act to sustain the forward motion of change as long as they continue to feel ownership in the planning process. Indeed, our observations further suggest that organization members who have bought in to the process will, in fact, resist external efforts to slow or redirect strategic momentum, and will avoid the internal temptation to slow or delay institutional progress -- even in the face of a vacuum created by a change in top leadership.

Second, our research also indicates that equally important to the success of the process are those steps taken to capture what Cyert (1985) refers to as the "attention-focus" of the institution and thus contravene the tendency -- so rife in academe -- toward compartmentalization and turf guarding. It is imperative that participants in the process, particularly on key planning councils, be demonstrably able to don "university hats," to see themselves as representing the whole of the enterprise and to act accordingly.

Third, the experience of the authors suggests this lesson for strategic planners: that leadership transitions do not merely create vacuums whose effects are benign and which can readily by filled by a planning process. Indeed as Warren Bennis (1973) has pointed out, these transitions unleash powerful forces in conflict for the soul of an institution and can infuse the political process of a campus with a viciousness such as would appall those outside the academy. So charged, in fact, does the campus atmosphere become during this period that strategic planning processes, to be effective, must negotiate a minefield of potential problems. There will be forces on and off campus whose agenda will be to subvert the planning process because planning represents a direction antithetical to the point of view of these forces. That is to say, strategic planning is hardly ever viewed with favor by those who wish to return the campus to the "good old days." And in this campus' experience, not only was there such active opposition to the continuation of strategic planning during the presidential search year, but the Tier Two Planning Council itself had two presidential aspirants as members, one of whom very actively sought to force the process to endorse his agenda and thus his candidacy. And finally, there were elements beyond the campus -- in the community, at other institutions, in the system office, and even on the Board -- for whom a vision of this campus as dynamic, outwardly focused, expansive, and entrepreneurial was threatening or antithetical.

Ironically, the threats of centralization and bureaucratization by the new state system of higher education largely failed to materialize in this transition year. In fact, the new system created a series of strategic opportunities for this campus which it -- convulsed as it was by the presidential search and self-absorbed with narrow, on-campus issues -- sadly failed to grasp. The new chancellor of the system had in fact offered this campus several initiatives which, in the absence of presidential leadership, went begging and were subsequently taken up by or assigned to other institutions.

Conclusions.

In times of leadership transition, strategic planning *can* be a tool for maintaining institutional momentum until the point of leadership change, when planning activities become at least temporarily superfluous and are suspended. For this campus, strategic planning bought a year of continued institutional cultural change in a period when the natural inclination was to do little if anything. Yet simultaneously, the presidential search process galvanized forces that were opposed to institutional change and gave them something around which to cohere.

Thus, for this University strategic planning proved to be a powerful tool for generating change in the organizational culture. Yet these very successes provoked a reaction among those resistant to change. And, while the planning process continued the forward momentum of the institution during the presidential search year, the search itself provided a convenient locus for the various on and off campus elements opposed to change. This opposition coalesced to effectively derail the candidacy of an on-campus spokesperson for a new vision of the University, and eliminated or discouraged outside candidates who were seen as advocates of change. While the planning process can be credited with bringing the campus to a point where new leadership can seize upon it and take it forward to new levels of achievement, it is not clear at this writing what the tenor of that leadership will be. The question is: "Where is the ship now? On the reef? Tacking? Faring forward?"

Despite the uncertainty of its future, it can be said that this "ship" held steady during a rocky, transitional period. It is clear that the dynamics of a well-institutionalized strategic planning process are such that they can buy valuable time. The process itself can produce an effect in the organization analogous to the effect of hull shape on a sailing vessel: the ship fares forward -- even in the doldrums. Yet hull shape cannot compensate forever for the absence of a captain with a strong hand at the tiller and a vision of where the ship needs to go.

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